Remebering Michael

By Chaplain Doug Vrieland

This coming week we will observe the eleventh anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon, and the related crash of United Airlines flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Most of us are probably able to remember exactly where we were when we heard the news. I can still picture in my mind waiting for the stoplight on Lockwood Blvd in downtown Charleston, S.C. when I first heard the news on the car radio.

I had the privilege of going to New York City in October, 2011, to assist with the recovery efforts. One of my tasks was to accompany family members of the victims who were killed to the site, where they got their first look at the place where their loved ones died. It was there that I met Michael.

Michael was sixteen years old when I met him. His father was in one of the towers that collapsed, and now he was making the pilgrimage to "ground zero" with his mother. Michael was not the typical sixteen-year old. He was more dependent on his father than most teen-agers. You see, Michael had Downs Syndrome.

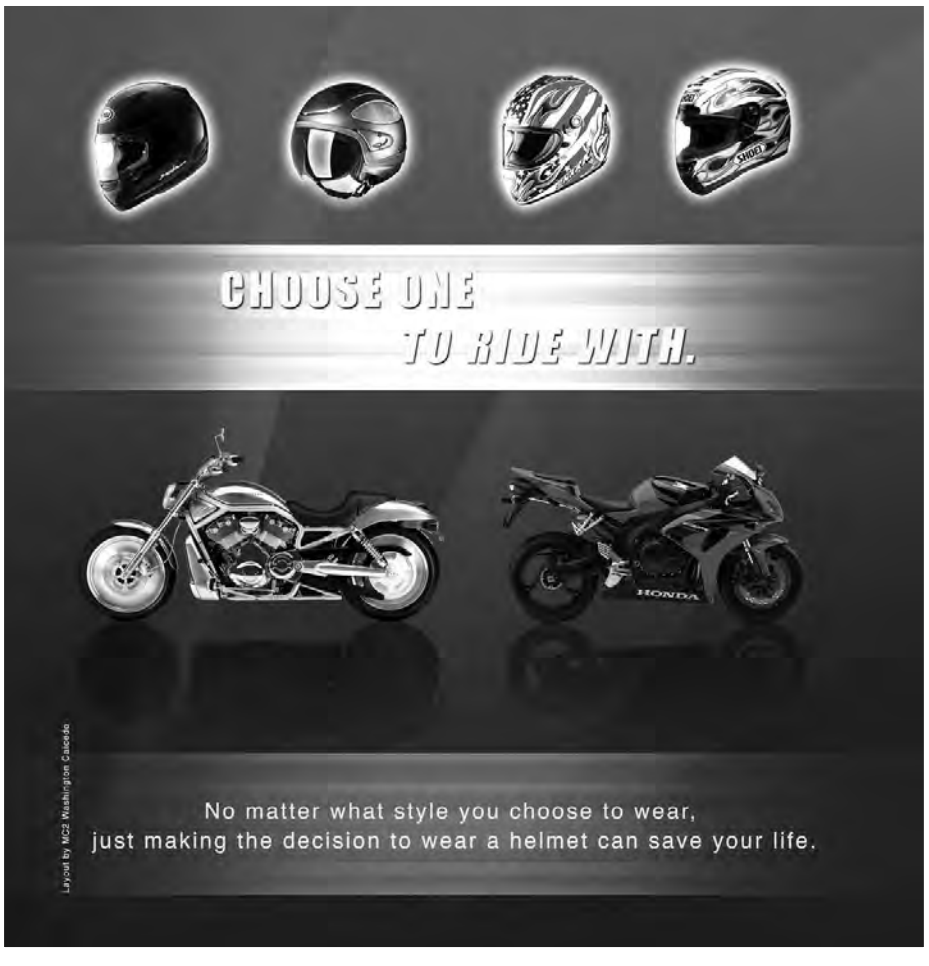
There are many stories of heroism that came out of those dark days in the autumn of 2001. The brave firefighters in New York City and the passengers on flight 93 that overtook the terrorists and saved the US Capitol building come to mind. For me, Michael's mother is one of the unsung heroes. Like so many I met, she was faced with the painful task of grieving the loss of her husband, but she had to do so with the additional responsibility of helping Michael deal with his loss. Her task was to try to help Michael, with his limited intellectual capabilities, understand something that she herself could not understand. She had to make the journey to that sacred spot with the son she loved; a son who was physically almost an adult but in most other ways was still a young child demanding constant attention. I was impressed with her strength as she faced the challenge of that afternoon stoically and yet with love and grace toward Michael. She was a real hero.

My task that afternoon was to look after Michael so that his mother could deal, at least for a few moments, with her own loss and grief. Fortunately I was able to connect with Michael, which allowed his mother the freedom to step away for a few moments and be alone with her intense emotions. After maybe five or ten minutes she returned to where Michael and I were standing, strengthened somehow by the emotional catharsis that she had experienced and able to take up once again the task of caring for Michael, a task that would be hers to bear alone, without a life's partner, from now on. She embraced her son, and the three of us began the journey back from that sacred site.

The City of New York provided a memorial site on that road back. At the beginning of the journey they provided flowers and small stuffed animals for family members to leave at that site in memory of their loved ones. Michael had chosen a "Winnie the Pooh" bear, which he left at that memorial site on the trip back. The next day as I passed that memorial site, I saw that Winnie the Pooh bear and was reminded of Michael. Since that time, whenever I see a stuffed Winnie the Pooh, I am reminded of Michael.

Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks of September 11, 2001, most of them civilians. It is hard to comprehend the amount of human suffering represented in a large number like that. Michael puts a human face on that big number. No one should have to deal with the loss he and his mother had to deal with, on top of all the other life challenges they face. That is why we serve in the military—to make sure the Michaels of our nation, and around the world, don't have to deal with such tragedy. By serving in the military, we are serving Michael, his mother, and thousands like them. To me it is a privilege to be able to serve Michael in this way, even as I was able to serve him and his mother on that October afternoon in 2001.

On behalf of Michael and his mother, I want to thank you for your service.



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it is similar to what they will have heard on base."

Houlden explained that the system is flexible and can be expanded or augmented. She said that a long range plan for the next ten years will include small indoor speakers that could be installed inside public buildings. She explained that the emergency management team will continue to work to make the system better and better.

"In the short term, we are asking people to bare with us as we test the new systems. The last two weeks of September, we will testing the speakers, in groups and individually. We will test the volume to make sure that it's loud enough to hear but not too loud. There is some fine tuning we need to get done but we only be testing from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We won't go through quiet hours and it will be intermittent. We'd really appreciate people's understanding while we go through the testing."

***POW/MIA** cont. from page 4*

are now two generations removed from Vietnam. Many people don't have a personal relationship to Vietnam; they don't know anybody that served in the Armed Forces and didn't watch the war unfold on television every night. They don't know the great sacrifices that those Americans have collectively made."

Remembering those that suffered during recent wars is important because modern wars become less relatable as time goes by, said Fenton.

"It's always important to have history lessons in our life to be reminded of our past because our past can become our future," said Cmdr. Daniel Mode, George Washington's command chaplain. "It is always important to remember that people before us gave the ultimate sacrifice and it reminds us of that reality."

There are more than 80,000 POWs and MIAs dating from modern wars in the Middle East to as far back as World War II.

"By doing what we're doing, by being a presence all around the world, that allows POWs and MIAs to know that we're still around and still looking for them," said Mode. "They would be truly overwhelmed with emotion that people all over the nation still remember them today."

George Washington and its embarked air wing, Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 5, provide a combat-ready force that protects and defends the collective maritime interests of the U.S. and its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region.

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the ship," said Quartermaster 2nd Class Ashley Fernandez, from San Diego. "Besides ensuring that our technical publications and training manuals are up to date, we have 17 charts that document our travel in the [U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations] and they have to be constantly updated and accessible at all times."

Through effective training, vigilance and teamwork, *George Washington* Sailors executed multiple evolutions and were rewarded with a successful grade.

"Our success was a team effort," said Fernandez. "We feed off one another and have a great synergy. I get nowhere without the support of the team."

Although completing CART II successfully, there is always room for *George Washington* Sailors to improve.

"We did extremely well overall, but there are a few areas where more training is needed," said Callan. "The training teams got great feedback from the assessors and they let us know what we did well and what needed improvement. It's good to have an extra set of eyes to maximize our effectiveness."

George Washington will continue in its preparations until early October, when ATG will return to conduct FEP and help increase proficiency of the crew in leveraging Fleet operations and exercises in carrying out the 7th Fleet mission.

"FEP is the World Series; once we complete FEP, *George Washington* is officially certified as a mission-ready aircraft carrier," said Callan.